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ABSTRACT

Participation in genealogy projects can be beneficial to older adults. Such projects combine reminiscing about family histories with the creation of a product which can be shared with relatives. The result is improved self-esteem and a feeling of accomplishment. Genealogy projects can also provide a means by which younger people can interact with and learn about older adults by helping them with research or by undertaking class projects in gerontology classes. For community-based older adults, these projects can be a part-time interest or a full-time occupation. For institutionalized older adults, they can be a goal-oriented therapeutic activity. Single session projects include using faces cut from magazines to create a family tree, mobile, or chart and making cloth dolls which resemble family members. Longer projects include: (1) moral wills; (2) family charts; (3) albums and booklets; (4) oral histories; (5) joint interviews; (6) collections of family documents; and (7) newsletters. Useful resources are libraries, genealogy societies, and reunions. (DC)

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Gerontology and Genealogy
Family Research as a Therapeutic tool for the Aged

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BACKGROUND

In 1963 Dr. Robert Butler coined the term "Life Review" and described its beneficial effects for the dying and for the elderly. Since that time, many have written about the subject of Life Review, expanded it, and focused on the therapeutic approaches. Perhaps one of the most extensive life review form is in Dr. Butler's newest edition of his book, AGING AND MENTAL HEALTH, in which a 20 page form is included to use not only as a self history, but as a way of stimulating the process of life review. Many concepts have emerged as a result of life review and the related area of reminiscence. In the October issue of the Gerontologist, a review of the literature on reminiscence is presented, indicating that a definite conclusion cannot be reached as to its benefits. Yet lately, the word reminiscence appears frequently in announcements of special training programs in aging. This paper goes beyond life review and reminiscence to a specific technique which may be used not only for therapeutic benefits with the aged, but also as a teaching technique for students of Gerontology.

In analyzing the words Genealogy and Gerontology, we find the common ending meaning study of. Gerontology has been defined as the study of aging. The term genealogy derives from the same root as the word gene associated with genetics and refers to our origins. In a sense the broad approach to a recording of genealogy and family history is a formalized method of long term reminiscence.

Since many studies of longevity focus on the concept that a long lived individual can be in part thankful to long lived ancestors and the patterns of health established in his family before him, one can see that analysis of one's own longevity expectations requires family research. Although the recent interest in searching for roots has in part been led by the young, it is also a fact that many retired individuals have taken up this endeavor as a way to leave a lasting heritage or momento behind for the young.

Dr. Kubler Ross in her work with the dying indicated that many individuals feel they must leave some type of legacy, some type of remembrance. Some may choose to leave a kind of moral will; others, another way in which what they know will in turn be known. Some may feel it is their duty to pass on information as it was passed on to them by their elders. Some retired individuals indicate that recording family history and genealogy is something they had wanted to do for years, but for which they did not have sufficient time. A genealogy search and recording may require not only time but may require money as well. However, both can be modified for a positive leisure pursuit.

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BENEFITS

From the therapeutic point of view, genealogical research is certainly a beneficial activity, one that is completely individualized. It can provide for activity of both mind and body, stimulates total functioning, provides challenges and great satisfaction. These are concepts that are important for successful aging. Genealogical research provides an opportunity for purposeful activity. It can enhance self esteem and promote a feeling of accomplishment. The search for and recording of family history can involve both physical and mental resources. It can be graded from the simple to the complex; from short term to long term; from person to person contact or self reflection to large scale encounters at a family reunion. Genealogical research can lead to recognition by others thereby improving the important sense of self. At the same time it can be handled in a moderate basis with limited resources.

Few materials are involved. Although the search can get costly where it includes long distance telephone calls or publishing costs, it can be held at a minimum using inexpensive correspondence, reflection or interviews and simple forms of data. It can actually involve all the senses, as well as reflecting on them: seeing, hearing, touching, and even tasting and smelling when preparing food for those being interviewed or those being reunited. Family recipes have been collected and tried in more than one genealogy project.

Such an undertaking can incorporate all the phases of reminiscence, not only with strangers in a therapeutic group in a residential facility, but with long lost relatives or those who have been known for years. Sometimes this in itself assuages guilt that may have been the result of not having been in contact with particular relatives. A concrete reason for contact is available. Although there are stresses involved, this stress can have a positive effect. The pressures and challenges of earlier life demands may be missed by the maturing adult. Contact with someone with whom there has not been contact for a while may provide stimulation and be of positive value, in spite of initial anxiety.

Of course, there are negative factors as well. There may be discouragement at times, perhaps (following a request for information) a rejection or lack of response or frustration at not being able to find the information desired. However, continuous challenges are healthy in the later years. This project allows for a multiplicity of approaches, so even where there is discouragement in one area, the results can be more encouraging in another. With the appropriate support an individual can shift focus and gain positive information and contact through another source such as library research.

INTERACTION OF YOUNG AND OLD

Although some may question library research for the frail aged, it is certainly possible via an approach which promotes positive relationships. The young sometimes feel uncomfortable visiting the old and often wish the time could be used more productively instead of just small talk with the older individual. The young visitor can help to research and record meaningful information for a family project. In the case of library research, the older individual can ask younger visitors to do some research for them in specific areas, to accompany them for a library visit, or to assist in contacting a source to find out if materials are available. Although the younger person may not be stimulated at first, this may provide a chance to have a direct focus and a way to do something for an older relative without being

required to just sit and visit. The younger visitor may lead with questions about earlier pastimes or personal knowledge of a particular historical period, individual or geographical area. Having someone to direct information encourages the elder to record information on tape.

STUDENTS OF AGING

Students in gerontology classes are often of varied ages and backgrounds. One of the exciting aspects of discussion in a gerontology class is the sharing of different experiences and different approaches in dealing with the aged. A genealogy project gives specific opportunity for research into ethnic and cultural differences and thereby leads to greater sharing and awareness in the class. Some effective classroom activities include interviewing parents, grandparents and elder relatives. Did elders live with their children? Did they live alone? Did they live in institutions? Was their advice respected? Were they consulted on important decisions? Were they together with the younger generation when entertaining? Were their stories passed on to successive generations? These and other questions present a picture of a lifestyle. Health information including age and cause of death is also valuable to the gerontology student.

To emphasize the point, that extensiveness and artistic presentations are not requirements in a family research assignment; on the day the assignment is distributed, students are handed a blank paper and asked to begin the family charting right in class. Some individuals are able to create meaningful diagrams displaying four generations. Through oral presentation to other students in the class, the importance of the content is demonstrated. One of the reasons for using a genealogy assignment is to enable the student to recognize that there is more to learn. Within the time of one semester only limited information on family history and awareness of past patterns can be obtained. Insight gained via contact with elders within the family is emphasized. The required interview elicits information that can be analyzed within the scope of the term project. Students can use additional notes gathered for future reference.

In one class on Aging and Health, the youngest student in the section had just recently come from Columbia with her sister, leaving parents, grandparents, and the entire family in South America. Ways in which she could handle a family research assignment were discussed since the semester was limited, and there was little time for long term correspondence. There was the possibility of interviewing an elder who knew the family, or the hometown, or handling the interviews by mail, or of potential telephone calls. In another instance a 19 year old in the class asked whether she could interview her parents. The instructor responded, "as long as they are over 65." They were. She was the youngest of ten children and took the course precisely to be able to understand her parents. In a third instance, an older student indicated that she thought her father had been adopted. The project triggered her interest in indentifying his origins. The instructor discussed genealogical research which includes adopted children (often identifying them as such) as legal descendants. The Student was referred to a faculty member who was president of an association of adopted parents, and implications of her doing her project on that family were discussed. Ultimately in interviewing her father's aunt, the student confirmed her suspicions that he was the illegitimate child of another member of the family.

This inquiry provided an opportunity for additional in-class discussions on the controversial issues that may emerge through interviews of elders and how they may be handled. The December "81" issue of "Toldot" included an article on the Genealogist as Family Historian and Family Secret Keeper. Issues such as adoption and suicide must be considered as well as individual requests for privacy with regard to age, second marriages and places of origin.

The instructor must be sufficiently familiar with genealogy resources available. A list of resources as well as procedural information should be provided for the student. The instructor should be aware of time factors with regard to the gathering of information toward completing the projects. Resources include a local public library, local genealogical society, bureau of statistics, department of health, city and county records offices, cemetary records, newspaper files and special resources available to particular ethnic groups or religious groups. In addition federal government records are important including the United States Census reports (recorded by address) and records from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service records. Passenger lists may be obtained. A chart of resources appears in Table Two.

Information obtained must be considered confidential. If a student is to have the value of a permanent record, the student should be encouraged to use real names on the final document, but the information shared with the class may be collective. Therefore, options should be presented, and students should be sensitized to the concerns of those interviewed as well as to the need to respect the information presented by other students.

OLDER ADULTS IN THE COMMUNITY

For the community based older adult, genealogical research can take on the parameters of a full time occupation, or be a part time interest. Some examples of family research carried out by actual community based elders follow:

(1) A 71 year old owner of a paper box factory, after reducing his work hours, made phone calls and took trips to many parts of the world to collect information which resulted in individual charts on heavy paper complied together via a cardboard box wrapping designed like a book especially for the collection. (2) A Judge in the midwest taped his father's oral history during his terminal illness. This helped to pass the time during the family visits as well as provide productive activity for the dying elder. Upon his father's death, the tapes were merely stored away. However, when the judge himself experienced a heart attack at age 67, he used the three week recuperation time to transcribe and edit the tapes into a book entitled "Grandpa, Tell us About the Family." It was mimeographed, tape bound and distributed to the descendants. (3) A 70 year old former businessman who retired to Florida was confined to bed as a result of a malignancy. He got "hooked" on the concept of family research when asked for some limited information by a younger distant relative. Although he couldn't write, he had a long distance tie line and enjoyed calling potential relatives all over the country, analyzing the information and then calling the results into the original inquirer. He reported that having that person as the supporting link was crucial to stimulate continued interest in the project when there were dissapointments such as reaching a non-responsive relative. "Rejections can be taken in stride if I have positive

as well. You have no idea how rewarding this has been to me personally." (4) An optometrist had waited for retirement to embark on the extensive and ambitious activity of mailing letters of inquiry to every person with the same last name as he in every telephone directory he could obtain. With the replies he was able to match those related to each other although not to him. Thus, he gained many contacts via correspondence. (5) A former lawyer also used correspondence to make contact with famous personalities by using information learned about his family as a way to introduce himself and find a tie to the recipients of his overtures.

ASSESSMENT & FAMILY THERAPY

Genealogy is also used for assessments. In several mental health clinics a Genogram is done at the time of intake. This helps to identify the significant members of the family, to clarify relationships, and to get a sense of the individual's position within the family configuartion. It helps to identify how a person perceives getting old by how one sees the old within the family. Genealogy related activities such as family scripting are also used in family therapy and in programs to train others to work with the old. A simple workshop exercise in a family therapy course pairs two students with one acting the role of the grandparent and the other the individual at age 5 reenacting an actual recollection from that time. Another activity in a family counseling class involves charting one's family with regard to personality patterns. Thus the student identifies those within the family who had similar traits such as sense of humor, creativity, exhuberance, etc.

THE INSTITUTIONALIZED

For the institutionalized older adult a genealogy project provides a goal oriented therapeutic activity. The project can be short term or long term and pursued on an individual or group basis. Examples of single session genealogy related projects follow:

(1) Faces cut from magazines are selected for their resemblance to family members and are so identified. They are pasted in appropriate positions on a picture of a tree also taken from a magazine; or pasted directly on construction paper. (2) Uniform sized paper (approx. 1" by 2") clippings or labels each containing a written recollection are evenly spaced on a magazine picture reminiscent of an early life event or phase which in turn may be used as an album cover. (3) A limited family mobile is created from cardboard cut into people shapes, on which pictures are pasted or drawn and then hung from a hanger. (4) Shapes representing males and females, eg. triangle and square, are cut from colored paper and pasted and labled in family chart form. (5) People designs are cut from cloth in duplicate, sewn and stuffed to resemble dolls and then connected together according to relationship and generations.

Example of results in a nursing home group of 4-6 individuals were as follows:

One woman immediately responded to a preselected magazine picture as reminding her of the family apple tree. She began recalling events and happenings related to the tree and asked for paper and pen to record such anecdotes as profound as a

as a three generation family gathering under the tree and as simplistic as the animals who used to live in and near the tree. She wrote each anecdote on a separate part of a standard size sheet of yellow paper. She then sought the therapist's advise about cutting them into separate units. She asked the therapist at one point to write some for her (which the therapist resisted) because she thought her handwriting not sufficiently clear for such an important project, which she intended to share with her grandchildren. Once the separate pieces got pasted on the magazine picture, she was so proud that she was impatient for it to be mounted and become the cover of an album. Another group member showed the usual resistance to participation, yet stayed to watch. Gradually she became more interested and involved as she saw others who needed help. Without calling attention to her role she began to do the cutting and pasting for those less able, asking questions about the family relationships and as a result making suggestions regarding positioning. Ultimately she began sharing about her own family. Another woman who considered herself unable, got quite excited when the therapist showed her faces cut from magazines. She began assembling her family saying "that's my son; now I need my grandaughter. She has dark curly hair." Another resident who reflected about her family as the activity was described asked to leave to use the toilet. It was expected that the subject may have been too traumatic for her. Yet, she returned. When it was learned that she enjoyed sewing and did not like paper crafts, she was started on an embroidered personal family chart, which she planned to hang in her own nursing home room.

PROJECTS

The single session project results in a simple but concrete object. A longer activity that extends over several sessions allows time for the important aspect of ventilating thoughts and feelings about family. Examples of longer term activities which still lead to a lasting momento and which can be used by community based or institutionalized elders are:

A Moral Will: Elders can be encouraged to think of a non-monetary legacy they might want to leave behind. The content is, of course, individual and requires some thought. It could be a philosophy of life, a reminder to take a particular interest in a person or an activity or a special request, such as maintaining family contact.

The style of presentation can then be an activity in itself. Lettering might be considered, or designing a background, or framing or embelishing certain sections with illustrations, or color.

A Family Chart: This can be as simple as recording the names of relatives known to the older adult with lines connecting descendants or can extend to many pages for extended family documentation. Styles may vary and allow for decision making. A straight listing using a numerical code eliminates the need for graphics. A genectic type round chart requires detail. To expand a simple chart, different shapes and colors can be cut from construction

paper and secured on a background or drawn into place. For a more extensive chart the process of obtaining the information can be a long term project. The form of recording could begin via available materials such as shelving paper or brown wrapping paper. Ultimately, if a more permanent record is sought, a decorative style and material might be used. Pictorial charts might be considered as well. A simple yet attractive form uses faces of family members cut from photos and pasted appropriately on a magazine tree picture.

Albums/Booklets: These can take the form of the traditional photo album or scrap book with a focus around a family theme. They can be embellished with anecdotes related to the momentos or photos depicted, or an entire project can be designed from cover to content including responses to interview questions, a standard chart or pictorial tree for each family and reflections.

History: An oral history might be dictated to another person or onto a tape recorder. One elder said, "I couldn't tell it to you, but I could tell it to the machine." Start small. Think only of a particular phase of life or a series of stories related to a particular theme such as work or folk legends through the generations. A simple fill-in form allows for beginning responses. Work sheets each dealing with a particular theme such as fragrances, years, games, neighbors, ideas, and encounters helps provide a focus for each session. An individual can be encouraged to write reminiscences. These can then be collected in an individual loose leaf book. When enough are accumulated they can be organized into catagories. An introduction and bridge statements can then be added creating an autobiography.

Joint Interviews: Individuals can be paired to ask each other questions from pre set forms which provide space for responses.

Collections: Asking for and compiling family documents or copies of them can create a story itself.

Newsletter: Information about family events and news can be compiled and distributed to others.

More lengthy projects can extend beyond the individual and his or her own knowledge to seeking or sharing information on a broader scale. Such endeavors might include:

Library Research: There are general books available on genealogical research. Reading itself can be a significant activity. However, checking resource material can provide the older adult with a feeling of responsibility and productivity. Also getting out to a library can be stimulating, as can the interchange with librarians who are often very helpful to the individual seeking roots. Sources include university libraries, genealogy society and historical society libraries, government archives and public libraries. The latter often have geographical or ethnic divisions.

Genealogy Societies: Attendance at meetings gives the individual a chance to share the sense of excitement of discovery, to learn more specific information and to get ideas from others. The older person is often encouraged by meeting others of that age group embarked on the same endeavor. Even receiving newsletters without attending meetings provides the stimulus to continue or to know it is a worthwhile endeavor.

Reunions: The older adult might be able to convince others to help in planning and carrying out a family reunion. It could be organized around a particular event or theme. A family gathering creates both short and long term goals. For example; the planning can be broken down into steps: a list of those to be invited, the invitations, reviewing and recording responses, preparing visual materials and speaking.

Thus we see that genealogy and gerontology have a natural relationship. Growing older and reminiscing about family go together. If channeled appropriately, genealogy may provide a meaningful experience for the maturing adult. The search for family information and the recording of the date obtained could be the incentive for the older adult to continue to look forward to the future and to make a contribution to it.